

The Great Culture War
The Battle for Right & Wrong
June 2, 2013

PRELUDE – “Alleluia”

Worship – “Immortal, Invisible” / “Our God”

Feature – “My Life”

Good morning everyone. I'm sure you all recognized that song and we'll talk about it in just a few minutes but, as Kitti said, today we are beginning a brand new series called “The Great Culture War” ... and I want to start out by giving a little bit of background as to why I felt it necessary to do this particular series at this particular time, especially since it may prove to be somewhat

controversial. There are two reasons.

First ... several weeks ago when I first threw out the idea of doing a Hot Topics series this summer – almost as a joke, really – I said that I had been shocked to hear the President of the United States saying, with great pride, that he (and his wife) had personally called Jason Collins (the pro basketball player who recently announced he was gay) to say *how proud he was of him for doing so*. (And as I said that day, I’m not a gay-basher and I have no axe to grind with Mr. Collins or his right as a member of a free society to “come out.”) What stunned me was that I just could not envision any previous president in my lifetime – Democrat or Republican, from John F. Kennedy through Bush ‘42 – even *thinking* that such a move would be

acceptable.

I was trying to explain my reaction to one of my daughters (who actually voted for Barack Obama in 2008), and she said, “Daddy, he’s a politician. He does and says whatever is necessary to stay in power. *He reflects the culture.*” And she didn’t mean that in a critical or condemning way. It was just a statement of fact.

And that’s the first reason I decided to do this series. I what our President did is to merely reflect the culture then that means that ...

There is a massive shift in cultural values playing out right before our eyes, embraced by those in positions of highest leadership in this country, in ways never before seen.

Whether that shift is good or bad isn't really the point (at least not yet – we'll get to that later). The point is that the traditional understanding of moral values is quickly being replaced by something else entirely (and we'll get to that, too).

The second reason why I felt compelled to do this series is also related to what I will call “the Collins incident” as well as another incident involving our President at about the same timeframe: *for the first time ever, a President spoke at the Annual Planned Parenthood Conference, praising their work with respect to what he called “women’s healthcare”* – which was even more shocking (at least to me) by the fact that over in Philadelphia, at the exact same

time, a doctor by the name of Gosnell was about to be convicted for brutally murdering babies who somehow survived his botched abortions by severing their spinal cords or slitting their throats.

And before you hear what I am not saying ... my purpose is not to debate the value of Planned Parenthood or the validity of pro-life or pro-choice this morning. We'll do that later this summer. All I'm doing is trying to explain what I've been seeing and, in particular, the second reason why I concluded this series is necessary.

And here is the reason: one of the most vehement and persistent claims made by the progressive and liberal thinkers of our day is that morality needs to be kept

out of the political arena. “Keep it to yourself, it’s my life.”

I don’t think anyone would argue that social conservatives are regularly derided for the fact that they try to combine the two. In fact, many political analysts say that the only way the Republican Party can survive going forward is to cease playing the morality card.

And yet, we have a liberal, progressive President who, *instead of staying out of the moral arena*, is publicly advocating – even celebrating – two moral positions that are completely at odds with the greatest and longest-standing moral traditions of our world (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity).

And I don't want to say that alarm bells and sirens went off in my head, but something like that happened. I mean, it's been very obvious that media and entertainment have openly denigrated and mocked traditional moral values for many years. But, those cultural systems really don't have any coercive power. You can turn off the TV if you don't like it. You don't have to go to their movies or download their music if you don't like it. It's a free country ... at least it is right now.

But this feels different. This feels like something other than just the continued shift in values; this feels like it might be the beginning of a dramatic shift in *power* because the government *can be* coercive. Just ask the organizations and individuals aligned with the "Tea Party"

(most of which “coincidentally” “just happen to be” religious and moral conservatives) who have recently been targeted by the IRS.

Now, I might be totally wrong about all that. I might be completely overreacting to our President’s recent moral endorsements and what that might mean with regard to coercive power being used against anyone holding traditional morals and values. I don’t claim to be a prophet.

But I don’t think you need to be a prophet to conclude that, if things keep going the way they are ...

It is about to become much more difficult to be a person (or an organization) who affirms traditional moral values.

People who believe in the Judeo-Christian values upon which, ironically, this country was founded are going to be more and more culturally ostracized if not outright persecuted.

And so I think it is necessary to talk about ...

- Whether it's even worth holding to these values. Maybe the critics are right; maybe traditional views of "right and wrong" are unnecessarily restrictive and damaging and should be rejected. Or maybe not.
- I think it is necessary to talk about how to respond to this culture war. Many conservative Christians over the years have fully exercised their

right as citizens of a free country to try and influence the political process in the name of righteousness. Maybe we need to do more of that; maybe not.

- I think it is necessary to talk about how to handle differing opinions on cultural and political issues between followers of Christ. It may surprise you to know that there are serious and committed Christians who are not Republicans. I know many of them because they are in this church.
- Then, finally, in light of all that's going on I think we need to talk about what the future might hold – both good and bad.

And we're going to talk about all of those things in this series because ...

Those are the topics of the four messages I'll be giving as you can see from the series card on the screen.

You also got one of those when you came in this morning so you can use it to invite someone who might be interested in these kinds of things.

Now, I know this has been a long-winded introduction but I think it's necessary to say one more thing. (And don't worry – I will be finishing this message on time).

The Apostle John wrote ...

*God did not send his Son
into the world to condemn
the world but to save the
world through him.*

John 3:17 (NIV)

What we're going to talk about this summer is not meant to be condemning. I'm pretty sure it will be convicting – you're probably going to be offended at some point and you're going to sense God saying “you're wrong and you need to change” – but that's not at all the same thing as condemnation.

My goal in this series is to be an apologist – to explain why we think the way we do and, hopefully, to show that it is the most sensible position of all – and to help followers of Jesus (and those who are thinking of becoming His

followers) learn how to think about these things. That's why we're not even going to talk about the specific issues until the second week of July. We need to build the foundation first so that we can process these things as *Christians* and not as Democrats or Republicans or Libertarians; not as straights or gays; not as pro-lifers or pro-choicers; not as progressives or conservatives – not as “whatever label the culture wants to tag us with today.”

And that's a pretty lofty goal in the middle of an increasingly contentious culture war ... which is why I would like to pray right now, before we get into the topic for today. Would you please join me?

<prayer>

Says Who?

“Keep it to yourself, it’s my life.”

If you had to choose one song that best illustrates what we’re going to be looking at in the rest of this message, I think that would be it.

- “Keep it to yourself, it’s my life.”
- “You have your way of thinking, I have mine.”
- “What’s right for you is right for you, but that doesn’t mean that it’s right for me.”
- “No one has the right to claim that any one set of values is better than any other.”

Unless you've been living under a rock somewhere, I'm sure you've encountered these ideas in one form or another – maybe at work or school; maybe in conversations with close friends or family members; *certainly* in books and movies and TV shows. But what you may not be aware of is that these ideas stake out one side of the issue upon which the entire culture war is founded.

That issue comes down to one singular question: “Who has the right to say what’s right and what’s wrong?” i.e. “Who has the right to define morality?”

20 years ago, a sociologist from the University of Virginia, Dr. James Hunter, wrote a book called *Culture*

Wars: The Struggle To Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America. In it, he defined the cultural conflict of our day as “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding.”ⁱ

According to Hunter, the culture war in America revolves around different worldviews, “our most fundamental and cherished assumptions about how to order our lives – our own lives *and* our lives together in this society.”ⁱⁱ And those worldviews primarily produce one of two answers to the question of “who has the right to say what’s right and what’s wrong?”

One answer is that morals and values are handed down from “on high.” They originate from an external and eternal

source. And that source may or may not be the Christian God. It may simply be natural law, as the Catholic theologians defined it centuries ago, a transcendent moral code which men and women are able to discover as they observe the natural order of things and listen to their consciences.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the early Christians at Rome described it this way:

Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell

them they are doing right.

Romans 2:14-15

(NIV)

When you lie to someone and you feel a pang of conscience, that's the natural law at work in you, Paul is saying. It's something external and eternal. You didn't think it up. It was already there and your virtuous (or less than virtuous) actions revealed it.

The other answer to the question of who gets to say what's right and wrong is that it is up to each individual. Each person has the right – the duty even, some would claim – to develop their own moral code consistent not only with their particular situation in life but also, and more importantly, with their “heart.” If your heart wants it ... if your

heart earnestly desires it ... then it must be right for you. To quote the song that made Debbie Boone a one-hit wonder (and, amazingly, is still being played on late-night infomercials – and, yes, I probably need to get a life) ... “it can’t be wrong if it feels so right.”

Basically, the two sides of the issue come down to this:

Morals and values are either absolute or they are relativistic.

They are either timeless and unchanging, or they’re something you develop as you go along, based on what feels right to you in the moment.

And what’s been happening in the last 50 years (since the cultural revolution of

the 1960s) is a shift *not just in values* but a *more fundamental shift* in *who* we believe has the right to define morality.

- 50 years ago most Americans believed that definition of ultimate right and wrong was to be found in something external to themselves (specifically, that morality was determined by God and revealed in the Bible).
- Today most Americans have been taught to believe (and do believe) that right and wrong are internal constructions.

Of course, the question is ... in the immortal words of Dr. Phil, “so how’s that workin’ for us?” Is this a good thing? Is it possible that the relativists

are right and we should continue to throw off all notions of an external and eternal code and develop something more appropriate to our technologically and socially advanced world?

I would argue “no” – relativism is not a good thing for three reasons.

1. Relativism has led to cultural decline.

We don't have time to go into all the statistics that illustrate the negative cultural trends – Google will give you all the data you want with regard to the last 50 years: the breakdown of the family, skyrocketing divorce rates, a huge rise in illegitimate births (and the virtually guaranteed poverty of those children), drug and pornography addiction and an

“epidemic” of sexually transmitted diseases ... to say nothing of declining test scores, declining worker productivity and a general lack of civility and kindness.

But I will share one small study cited by Catholic theologian Peter Kreeftⁱⁱⁱ which said that a generation ago ...

... the five most bothersome problems complained about in polled American high schools were:

1. disrespect for property
2. laziness; not doing homework
3. talking and not paying attention in class
4. throwing spitballs
5. leaving doors and windows open

That same poll, Kreeft writes, was

retaken a few years ago. The five leading problems in those same high schools were listed as:

1. fear of violent death; guns and knives in school
2. rape
3. drugs
4. abortion
5. getting pregnant

Times have changed.

Now, some would argue that there is not necessarily a cause and effect relationship between cultural decline and increasing relativism. But I would ask, “then what is the cause?” What other answer best fits the data?

As one social commentator recently

said:

“When the idea that people have the right to choose the wrong [because the redefine it as “right”] ... when that idea becomes acceptable, you can’t pretend that error would not spread like a cancer.

“The more that people are free to choose it the more they *will* choose it and they will choose it *in ever-growing numbers* until a critical mass is reached where more will choose it than not ... and that's when the crossroads is reached. A culture will begin to collapse.”^{iv}

A second reason why a relativistic approach to right and wrong is not a good idea is that ...

2. Relativism is a nonsensical moral philosophy.

In other words, from a philosophical and practical viewpoint, it doesn't hold together. It simply doesn't make sense.^v And there are many reasons why that is true but, in the interest of time, let me give you just one that's killer.

Have you ever noticed that someone who claims to believe that all morals are relative will always react with moral indignation when he or she is treated immorally? Let them be lied to, be the victim of false advertising, or of a crime and he or she instantly becomes a believer in moral absolutes! “*That’s just wrong*” they will declare (and rightfully so). A person’s reaction to what they

consider unfair ethical treatment always betrays their true feelings on the matter of relative vs. absolute moral laws.^{vi}

The man who says “keep it to yourself, it’s my life. I determine what’s right and wrong based on what I feel” when justifying why he cheated on his wife and left her for another woman, will amazingly reject that same relativistic principle when his new wife later uses it to justify leaving *him* for another man.

One more reason why relativism is not a good approach is that ...

3. The ultimate value espoused by relativism – tolerance – is illogical.

If there is no such thing as an external set of absolute morals and values, and

right and wrong are determined only by individuals, then how must we act towards people who hold different morals and values from ours? With tolerance. Tolerance is the ultimate value by which all other values are judged.

I recently discovered this personally in an online dialogue I had related to the “the Collins incident.” Sam Mellinger, who I think is an excellent sportswriter for the K.C. Star, wrote an article that labeled anyone who objected to Collins’ homosexual behavior as ignorant and homophobic. I wrote, in response, that there are multitudes of intelligent and well-reasoned people who sincerely love gay men and women but don’t believe that homosexual behavior is morally acceptable. And I said that they might be

wrong in that belief, but that doesn't mean they are stupid or “afraid of gays.”

At that point, even though I purposely never addressed the moral question of homosexuality (only the bashing of anyone who objected to it) several other readers chimed in on my comments and accused me of looking down on minorities and ... shocker ... of being intolerant.

Here was my response (which points out the logical fallacy of tolerance and hence, relativism).

What you are saying is that tolerance is the ultimate (if not only) value; if I disagree with that then (in your eyes) I am immoral and hence, you are looking down on me in the same way that you say I should not look down

on others. How is that logical?

(It's not)

Then I added ...

Bonus question: what gives you (or anyone) the moral authority to declare “tolerance” as the ultimate virtue?

That was the end of the discussion. There was no further response.

The hidden assumption in the discussion was that tolerance is really, objectively, universally, absolutely good. But if no moral values are absolute, neither is tolerance.

To look at it another way, if there are no

moral absolutes, then what's wrong with being intolerant?

Because it feels better to be tolerant? Or because it is the popular consensus?

Well what if it no longer feels better? What if tolerance ceases to be popular?

Big problem because as Peter Kreef writes,

“Relativism can appeal to no external moral law as a dam against the flood of intolerance.

We desperately need such a dam, because societies, like individuals, are fickle and fallen. What else will deter a humane and humanistic Germany from turning to an

inhumane, Nazi philosophy of racial superiority? Or, a now-tolerant America from turning to a future intolerance against any group it decides to disenfranchise? It is unborn babies today, born babies tomorrow. Homophobes today, perhaps homosexuals tomorrow.

“The same absolutism that [progressives] usually fear because it is not tolerant of their *behavior* is their only secure protection against intolerance of their *persons*.”

The bottom line here is that philosophically and practically speaking, it's far more logical and wiser to have an unchanging standard we can turn to and an absolute authority by which proper moral obligation can be defended.

Without these, morals and ethics simply become emotionally-based preferences – and that’s a prescription for disaster.^{vii}

Why the Shift?

Now, I know we’ve gone pretty deep into the weeds here but, sometimes, it’s worth it if you’re looking for that four-dollar golf ball you just shanked. And understanding at least some of the reasons as to why it makes no sense to hold to a relativistic viewpoint is worth the trip. But let’s get back into the fairway.

We’ve talked about the fact that values have shifted dramatically and that the reason for that shift is primarily because of a more fundamental shift in how

values are determined. But a question of even greater importance is “why did that shift happen?” Why was there a dramatic move from absolutism to relativism in this culture? How could people who are so smart in so many ways have become so illogical about something that is so critical to our survival as a culture?

To answer that question, I want to read you another passage from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome. He writes (and this is in chapter 1 beginning in verse 18):

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since

what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

Romans

1:18-20 (NIV)

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the

immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Romans 1:21-23

(NIV)

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural

ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. Romans 1:24-27 (NIV)

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.

Romans 1:28 (NIV)

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed

and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

*Romans 1:29-32
(NIV)*

... which is moral relativism in action. “If you think it’s right for you, then go

ahead – it’s OK.”

I don’t know about you but that description makes me wonder if Paul had a prophetic vision of CNN back in the day.

And that question we raised – how could people who are so smart in so many ways become so morally confused and illogical? He answers it. Twice. Resoundingly.

Here’s the first time:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they

claimed to be wise, they became fools ...

*Romans 1:21-23
(NIV)*

Here's the second:

They did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind ...

Romans 1:28 (NIV)

Do you see the pattern here?

- God reveals Himself to humanity through creation and the existence of natural law.
- Humans reject this revelation.
- Our minds are closed and confused.
- God gives us over to whatever behavior we can rationalize.^{viii}

The implication here is astounding.

God Himself is the external and eternal source of moral reasoning.

I see this almost every time whenever I play golf and join up with someone I don't know. Eventually, the conversation almost always comes around to what everyone does for a living and when I "come out" as a pastor, language and topics of conversation almost always change.

Why is that? It's because, without ever being told, people understand that God's character has very direct implications for their conduct. No one has to say that God is holy and is displeased with ungodly behavior. We know intuitively

that God's character brings with it certain obligations regarding our conduct.

And, therefore, if you reject Him, it's not very long until your moral compass begins to malfunction ... which is what Paul is describing here.

By the way, since I've mentioned homosexuality a couple of times in this message (and again this series is not about gay-bashing), I think I should point out that, while it is specifically mentioned in Paul's writing as one of the manifestations of a culture which collectively chooses to reject God, it is *only one ... of many ...* manifestations.

Actually, I should say, it is one of many *more-commonly-occurring*

manifestations such as greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, blasphemy, insolence, arrogance and boastfulness. The predominance of those attitudes and behaviors is the sign of a culture that has rejected God.

In addition, Paul says the predominance of those attitudes and behaviors is a sign of God's judgment on a culture. It's like God says, "you don't want me, then that's OK. Have your way." And "our way", in which we are God-like, determining right and wrong (eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), eventually leads to cultural chaos.

For Christians

Now, I could stop here ... but I did you notice that that Paul – after going through a lot of verbiage about sexual perversion – jumps to what most of us would consider “lesser sins.” He seems to consider “shameful lusts” to be on the same level as gossip and greed. I think that’s fascinating. Why would he do that?

To answer that question – which, I think you will see has a very important application to you and me – we need to read what he writes next in chapter 2.

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you

*judge another, you are
condemning yourself,
because you who pass
judgment do the same
things. Romans
2:1(NIV)*

The church that Paul was writing to was in the middle of a very relativistic culture. But it had some members who were Jews who had decided to believe in and follow Jesus as the Messiah. And they tended to be very self-righteous because they had grown up in a very absolutist culture.

But Paul said their culture had the same issue, the same root problem as the relativistic Gentile culture: *it was stubborn, hard-hearted and sinful just like every other culture* – and the truth of his assertion was clearly seen on the

pages of the Old Testament. So he wrote:

Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile ... For God does not show favoritism.

*Romans 2:5,9,11
(NIV)*

If you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because

you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles

because of you.”

Romans *2:17-24*
(NIV)

Wow – that’s scathing isn’t it? “Your sin,” Paul is saying, “though it might be manifested differently from the sin of your relativistic culture, is just as bad. Actually, it’s worse because it makes God look really bad to the people who don’t yet know Him.”

And I think the application for those of us who look at this culture and shake our heads in disbelief is the same:

When it comes to our moral compass and moral behavior, are we any different from the world around us?

Or, are we just like everybody else?

- Greedy – spending everything we have on ourselves and our little circle?
- Depraved – getting pleasure from behaviors that ought to disgust us?
- Envious – never satisfied with what God has given us?
- Murderous – maybe not in deed but in word and critical spirit,
- Strife - stirring up trouble; rabbleroising
- Deceit – being less than honest, leading people to believe things that are not true.
- Gossip – talking behind people’s backs instead of to their face
- Slander – making people look worse to others than they really are
- Taking God’s name in vain – using it as a curse word or just flippantly

throwing it around like everyone else does?

- Insolence – quick with a derogatory remark, rudeness and lack of respect for others
- Arrogance and boastfulness

And I'm not even going to get into the part about "shameful lusts."

Friends, the world has changed drastically but the ultimate question before us has not: *are we living the virtuous life we should live?*

Paul's concern – and I think God's concern – isn't so much about who makes the rules for "them"? It's who makes the rules for us? For those of us who claim that Jesus is our savior; those of us who claim to be his followers?

So, as we close this morning, I want to take just a few minutes for us to think on that. In fact, I'm going to shut up for a few minutes so God can speak to each of us individually. Maybe go back through that list that Paul laid out.

Would you bow your heads in prayer?

<silence / prayer – repent & rejoice>

Feature – “Who Makes the Rules?”

CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick

1. Next week – whose side are we on (as followers of Jesus)? how to respond to this culture war.

2. Father's Day – two weeks, celebration

of the incredible value of Christian men.
Will be fun, meaningful, Invite!

3. Things I said today may have tweaked
you a bit ... hit a nerve ... hear the whole
series before you decide you're out.

Endnotes

ⁱ Dr. James Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle To Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America, pg 42

ⁱⁱ Pg 50

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/culture-wars.htm>

^{iv} Michael Voris, S.T.B., ChurchMilitant.tv
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPAc6cz7Cl0>

^v This section and the next are concepts discussed in great detail at
http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05_relativism/relativism_transcription.htm

^{vi} <http://carm.org/moral-relativism>

^{vii} <http://carm.org/moral-relativism>

^{viii} <http://bible.org/seriespage/present-wrath-god-romans-115-32>